

31 January 2021 The Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

Collect

God of heaven,
you send the gospel to the ends of the earth
and your messengers to every nation:
send your Holy Spirit to transform us
by the good news of everlasting life
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Readings

Deuteronomy 18 v 15-20

¹⁵ The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. ¹⁶ This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: 'If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.'
¹⁷ Then the LORD replied to me: 'They are right in what they have said. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet. who shall speak to them everything that I command. ¹⁹ Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. ²⁰ But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.'

Mark 1 v 21-28

²¹ They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²² They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³ Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴ and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' ²⁸ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

A reflection on Mark 1v21-28: Jesus' Authority in Word and Action

As I write this the ground outside is covered in snow... but in our Sunday readings we have turned from Christmas and Epiphany days and themes, to the beginning of Jesus adult and public life. John the Baptist has proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom; Jesus has been baptised; the wilderness temptations have happened; Peter, Andrew and the sons of Zebedee have been called to be his disciples; and his first miracle at a wedding in Cana has happened. Now Jesus steps out centre stage, at Capernaum, a prosperous town on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus was in a synagogue on the Sabbath, a place set apart for study and worship. The 'teachers of the law' (v22) were the authorities in the interpretation and application of the Law of Moses to daily life. They frequently quoted scripture, but Jesus on this occasion, does not: he speaks directly, confident of his authority.

We don't know exactly what Jesus said on this occasion; but we do know that the people were amazed, as he taught with authority. Perhaps his words conveyed the idea that God's way was not as burdensome as the teachers of the law made it, that his yoke was easy and his burden light (see Matthew 11:28-30). But, like John the Baptist, he probably confronted the people with God's absolute claim over all of their lives, perhaps reflecting the demands of the prophets for people to turn back to God. The Bible teaches that we are saved by God's grace, his undeserved favour, but it brings the responsibility of following God's ways, ways that are best for ourselves and others. Our obedience shows that our acceptance of God's grace is genuine.

The people had already noted the authority with which Jesus delivered his teaching (v22) before he delivered the man with the evil spirit (v23). Under the influence of this evil spirit the man asks what Jesus is doing meddling in the domain of evil. Jesus, addressed as 'the Holy One of God', shows his power by commanding the evil spirit to come out. Verses 12-13 have briefly related the victory of Jesus over the devil's temptations in the desert; now see the first fruits of his ultimate victory over the devil, the victory won on the cross.

The crowd (v27) acknowledges Jesus' authority in word and deed and as a result of this incident in the synagogue news about his authority over evil and his authority in teaching spread across the whole region.

So what might we take away from this passage? May I suggest three things:

- Jesus has the authority of God; therefore, we should follow his teaching for our lives. It offers God best ways for our lives; anything else is not just second best but a dangerous rejection of God's saving grace.
- Jesus has the power of God over evil. Therefore, we need fear nothing and no-one because Jesus has won the victory for us. We can be secure in the knowledge that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus.
- We have the wonderful duty and joy of telling others about the good news of Jesus, the one who sets people free.

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